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Comeback Kids

by Marina Mayer

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Snack bar makers are stepping up to the podium with a new nutritional ticket that's sure to win them votes from a variety of constituents.

In any crowded field, it's easy for candidates to get overlooked if they don't get their message out.

In the bar category, cookies, candy and even cereal all play in the same alley and bring comparable campaign messages to the kitchen pantry. As a result, over the past two to three years, snack bar sales have struggled to stay in the limelight as consumers, put off by lousy-tasting products geared toward the Atkins craze and diet-frenzy fads, pushed the category into the corner.



No more. Snack bar producers now are taking charge of how Americans snack by adding flavor, functionality and affordability to their ballots. They're doing so by offering better-tasting and more nutritious new products for better-educated consumers.

And guess what? They're not only back. They're back at what they do best, and that's raising the bar.

Take, for example, St. Louis-based Clinical Products, LLC, and its line of ExtendBars — a low-carb snack with a low glycemic index that stabilizes blood sugar for up to nine hours.

Likewise, consumers can jump on the Omega-3 bandwagon with the rollout of Aristo Health's Aristo Wellness Bars, the first string of nutrition bars containing encapsulated, tasteless fish oils.

Americans also can change up their snacking habits with Attune's probiotic wellness bars in Dark Chocolate and Mango Peach varieties.

Then there's Abbott Nutrition's ZonePerfect nutrition bars, the first to combine rich, indulgent dark chocolate with antioxidants that support the immune system.

"I think as the Baby Boomer population gets older, they're becoming more and more conscious of being healthy," says Michael Smulders, president of Bakery on Main, Glastonbury, Conn. "People want to eliminate trans fats, increase fiber and reap the benefits of oats in preventing heart disease. This is a trend that is not going away."

Forget the recession. People still hold purchasing power, and they're spending their greenbacks on more nutritious foods ... as long as they're convenient and taste good.

"[People] increasingly want convenient foods that are natural — something nutritionally sound in a format that people love to consume, whether they're in the car driving to work or just in need of a between-meal snack," notes GurshBindra, CEO of Aristo Health, Inc., Morristown, N.J.

For the People

Once viewed as fuel for jocks and granola-heads, the bar category has broadened its base by targeting regular Americans searching for



products that fit into their hectic, yet health-driven lifestyles. Snarfing down bars in between meals or as an actual meal replacement is key for homemakers shuffling their kids to and from after-school activities, as well as the Hillarys, Lauras and CondoleeZZas of the world, whose jobs are so important they just don't have enough time to sit down for a meal.

"Consumers are becoming more sophisticated; health professionals are becoming more sophisticated," says Vijay Chauhan, president of Clinical Products and co-creator of ExtendSnacks. "[They] are getting more educated on how to read labels and how to spot what's real versus a marketing gimmick."

Providing bars with non-conventional additives is another ballot-booster. Berkeley, Calif.-based Clif Bar & Co. prides itself on producing all-natural, organic bars meant to enhance energy and meet consumers' health goals.

"We continue to see consumers' education and awareness increasing about what foods are good for their personal health," says Michelle Ferguson, Clif Bar's senior vice president of brand marketing. "We see more and more people buying with a conscious and looking for brands that share their values. Busier lifestyles mean portability."

The more consumers know about the candidates running to be category leader, the more likely they are to make educated decisions that benefit them as consumers and Americans.

Voting for Flavor

As in this year's election, competitors in the bar category offer a host of platforms with flavors of their own.

One new treat is Bakery on Main's gluten-free granola snack bars in Cranberry Nut, Extreme Trail Mix and Peanut Butter Chocolate Chip varieties.

Soy lovers rejoiced at the unleashing of Pharmavite's SOYJOY, a soy nutrition bar in Strawberry and Peanut Chocolate Chip flavors.

And Aristo bars appeared last September in trendy profiles such as Pomegranate and Cranberry, Acai-Blueberry and Lime and Goji Berry and Orange.

Not to be outdone, Attune has introduced 100-calorie bars in Chocolate Crisp, Mint Chocolate and Blueberry Vanilla varieties.

Meanwhile, British Columbia, Canada-based Nature's Path launched chocolate chip granola bars in dark chocolate with a coconut kick. And Amish Naturals' high-fiber initiative turned up in fiber-rich Peanut Butter and Fruit and Nut.

Smulders says that consumers shouldn't have to sacrifice better health for taste. And despite new lines featuring exotic ingredients from all parts of the world, old favorites still dominate the category when it comes to flavor.

"We've tried tropical things in the past, and they've done okay for a while," he says. "But over time, people tend to return to the traditional-tasting flavors like vanilla, peanut butter and chocolate."

Bringing the right flavor to the table is half the battle for the bar industry, but one that can't be ignored when campaigning for consumer attention.

Bars' 'Nuclear' Power

At the height of the bar frenzy, some producers battled stereotypes within the category regarding so-called wellness bars. Bars were stripped of negative nutritional aspects, such as calories, but still overruled with a high volume of fat grams. Like some politicians, it became about fooling the public into believing they could do good for the people just to get votes, without holding up their end of the bargain.

But wellness bars have slashed those nasty rumors, in spite of political gain, and instead have gone "nuclear," as our president likes to say, by offering unique functions.

Figuratively, bars are blowing up other snack foods with an arsenal of natural and organic ingredients, and a blast of energy that makes for a more suitable way to snack in between campaign fights.

"Overall natural and organic volume has skyrocketed in almost every category," says Troy Treangen, COO of Amish Naturals, Inc., Holmesville, Ohio. "People are looking at convenience items with nutritional value. Fast and easy is what's more important to consumers."

Bindra dubs Aristo Health's bars "functional foods" because they provide key super-nutrients, which nowadays people are not getting in sufficient quantities. With this approach, they try to target consumers from all walks of life.

"We're not just a bar company; we're going to be more than that," Bindra adds.

But why use bars as its vehicle for delivering nutrition?

"Here in North America," he says, "bars are ... consumed more readily, either being used as a meal replacement or as a source of high fiber or, increasingly, as a healthy snack. We've created this whole segment [within bars] called the wellness section."

Clinical Products also has done this with its ExtendBars, an extension of its ExtendSnacks line. The bars help minimize blood sugar and decrease calorie intake by 21% by controlling hunger and avoiding the turbulence of blood sugar highs and lows.

"The notion that if you can eat food to keep your blood sugar level stable, it will lead to a healthy lifestyle, is becoming more recognized," Chauhan says. "The roller-coaster of blood sugar highs and lows can cause weight gain versus weight loss, and consumers are realizing that foods that keep your blood sugar level stable are the right foods to eat."

Meanwhile, Clif Bars' products are as healthful as they are environmentally friendly.

"We use ingredients you would find in nature and organic ingredients that decrease our exposure to pesticides and support sustainable agriculture," Ferguson says. "At the end of the day, we make nutritious food that promotes a healthy lifestyle for athletes and active people."

Speaking of healthy lifestyles, Amish Naturals hopped on the granola trail to promote its line of high-fiber granola bars, which contain no traces of high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated vegetable oils, trans fat or genetically-modified organisms.

"Lots of products have additives," Treangen says. "With our granola bars, we're only adding the ingredients that people want to eat, which in turn makes the bar more healthy. All the unnecessary additives have been removed."

Addressing another trend, San Francisco-based Attune Foods is rolling out probiotic wellness bars that are packed with five times the beneficial cultures found in yogurt.

Rob Hurlbut, Attune's president and CEO, says the ability to incorporate live cultures around a bar structure is what differentiates the company's products. He hopes to lure consumers from another category altogether.

"We're taking this bar form and applying it to a refrigerated category that will, we hope, target a different kind of audience," he says. "Here are the benefits of yogurt offered in a bar form."

Then there's the PowerBar Energize Fruit Smoothie bar from Glendale, Calif.-based PowerBar (owned by Nestlé). Call it the perfect marriage of natural energy and the refreshing taste of a fruit smoothie, says Chris Ota, director of marketing.

"PowerBar set out to make the best-tasting performance bar to date using natural ingredients while maintaining the performance attributes important to our athletes," he says.

Athletes also can turn to Abbott Nutrition, Columbus, Ohio, which stepped out into its own zone with ZonePerfect nutrition bars. The bars come complete with antioxidants and immune-system-supporting properties, and are available in Double Dark Chocolate, Dark Chocolate Almond and Dark Chocolate Strawberry varieties.

"ZonePerfect strives to break through the sea of sameness within the category without compromising the integrity of the product and brand," explains Julia Stoner, senior brand manager.

For Americans looking to go in a new direction, Forward Foods, LLC, Minden, Nev., offers its Detour bars — 0.7 oz. of pocket-size energy made with whey protein and containing a solid carb/fat/sugar ratio.

With so many tasty nutritional bars from which to choose, there's no excuse for low-energy blunders. So when candidates begin flubbing their speeches and mispronouncing words, just pass them one of the aforementioned snacks. They'll come back real quick. n

Editor's Note: This article originally ran in the June 2008 issue of *Snack Food & Wholesale Bakery*, a *Confection & Snack Retailing* sister publication.

Marina Mayer